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ABSTRACT

A total of 136 child care workers from licensed day care facilities were surveyed regarding their perceptions of job value, support systems, and indices of professionalism. Overall, younger and older respondents did not differ in their perceptions of job importance or success. They did differ in their ratings of traditional male and female occupations, including child care work, and in their perceived support from spouses, children, child clients, parent clients, and society. Older child care workers rated traditional male jobs higher and traditional female jobs lower. Their reported perceptions of support from children for their child care work were higher than those of younger workers, while perceptions of support from society were lower. Implications for career development, training of older child care workers, and professional development are discussed. (Author/RH)

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Characteristics of Older Child Care Workers

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ABSTRACT

One-hundred-thirty-six younger and older child care workers from licensed day care facilities were surveyed regarding their perceptions of job value, support systems, and indices of professionalism. Overall, younger and older respondents did not differ in their perceptions of job importance or success. They did differ in their ratings of traditional male and female occupations, including child care work, and in their perceived support from spouses, children, child clients, parent clients, and society. Older child care workers rated traditional male jobs higher and traditional female jobs lower. They reported perceptions of higher support than younger workers from their children and lower support from society for their child care work. Implications for career development, training of older child care workers, and professional development were discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of dual-earner and single parent families has stimulated interest in child care issues within the United States (Whitebook, 1984). While recent attention has focused on understanding the conditions surrounding child care work (e.g., high turnover, burnout, low wages), little is known about how age affects child care workers' perceptions of the value of their job, their support systems, or their roles as professionals. Yet women 55 years of age and over are entering the ranks of child care workers in increasing numbers (Hess & Markson, 1985). In fact, the occupation child care worker is estimated to employ 4.6% of the 65 and older female workers in this country, which means the child care field has nearly four times its expected share of older workers (Bird, 1987).

As a group, older female child care workers have personal histories that differ significantly from those of younger colleagues. Older workers had fewer occupational choices when they were young. Women over sixty years of age had significantly fewer opportunities to become lawyers and doctors. Instead, they were raised in a cohort wherein traditional occupational choices and values were fostered. Men worked outside the home as "breadwinners" and women remained in the home to fill the roles of wife and mother.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effects of age on female child care workers' perceptions of their job value, their support systems, and their roles as professionals. Worker perceptions are paramount since, as

Bronfenbrenner (1979) states "the aspects of the environment that are most powerful in shaping the course of psychological growth are overwhelmingly those that have meaning to the person in a give situation" (p. 22).

METHODS

Subjects. Data were collected from 136 child care workers who worked in licensed day care facilities in a midwestern state. In this study the term day care worker was operationally defined using a description from current state licensing regulations. Day care center worker referred to the adult who cared for children on a regular basis in a center-based setting for pay.

Included in this sample were 40 caregivers designated as "older" who were 60 years of age or older (M = 64.2 years). These older workers were from rural (N = 13; 32.5%) and urban (N = 27; 67.5%) areas. They worked at least 25 hours weekly for an average of 5.3 hours per day. Of the forty respondents in this category, 29 (72.5%) had children and 11 (27.5%) were childfree: 8 were married and 32 were unmarried (widowed [N = 21]; divorced [N = 3]; single [N = 8]). Older workers' mean years of education was 11.7. When asked to identify their primary jobs within the child care setting, 28 (80%) of the older respondents described themselves as teachers and 7 (20%) described themselves as caregivers.

By contrast the group of 96 child care workers designated as "younger" reported a mean age of 27.4 years. These workers were also from rural (N = 36; 37.5%) and urban (M = 60; 62.5%) areas.

They worked at least 25 hours weekly for an average of 6.7 hours per day. Of the 96 younger respondents, 75 (72.8%) had children and 21 (21.8%) were childfree: 85 (88.5%) were married and 11 (11.5%) were unmarried (widowed [N = 1]; divorced [N = 5]; single [N = 5]). Younger workers' mean years of education was 12.6. They described themselves as teachers (N = 28; 29.8%); administrators (N = 24; 25.5%), and caregivers (N = 42; 44.7%)

Instrument. The occupational worth of traditional male and female jobs, including child care work, and indices of professionalism were measured using the Occupational Worth Inventory (OWI). An initial draft of the OWI was constructed based on a review of the literature (e.g., Almy, 1975; Apple, 1983, 1985; Bledstein, 1976; Bloxall & Reagan, 1978; Caldwell, 1984; Combs, 1982; Cravens, 1985; Eiskovitz & Becker, 1983; Hostetler & Klugman, 1982; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1984a, 1984b; Pleck, 1985; Schreiber, 1979; Spencer, 1986) and the researcher's experience as a child care worker and an instructor of early childhood. The initial draft was piloted with 23 senior early childhood education students and five child development faculty members to improve item clarity and questionnaire format.

After the pilot study, the OWI was revised and administered to 136 child care workers who voluntarily attended behavior management workshops provided by the University of Nebraska under a contract with the Nebraska Department of Social Services. The 52 item inventory was divided into four sections: (1) demographic characteristics [workshop demographics, age, sex,

marital status, educational level, occupational demographics, family demographics]; (2) job characteristics [current job, job longevity data, role descriptors, job conditions, benefits]; (3) job values [rankings of perceived job value - "Rank how you view the social value of each of the following jobs", deserved pay - "Which of the following early childhood professionals should be paid the most?", deserved status - "Rank how you view the social status (amount of prestige) for each of the following jobs", career profile patterns, occupational ratings]; (4) family descriptors [family strengths items, perceived family support items]. Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients were computed for the family support and family strength items. The reliability estimates were .87 for the family support items and .79 for the family strength items.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The results were divided into three sets for data analysis: job value, perceived support systems, and indices of professionalism. Job value was chiefly concerned with workers' perceptions of occupational worth of traditional male and female jobs, including child care work, as measured by job ratings. Support systems were concerned with worker ratings of the perceived support received from family members, child and parent clients, and society. Indices of professionalism were items concerned with reported job title, workers' identification of themselves as professionals and business people, and ratings of job success.

Job Values

Subjects rated the question "How important do you feel you job is?" using a five point Lickert-type scale (1 = unimportant to 5 = very important) (Kirk, 1982). The result of the analysis of variance for job importance by group (older worker versus young worker) revealed no significant differences. Both older ($\underline{M}$ = 4.7436) and younger ($\underline{M}$ = 4.7347) child care workers rated their jobs as highly important.

To determine the effect of age on child care workers' rating of traditional male and female occupations (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1979), subjects were asked to rate on a five point scale (1 = lowest to 5 = highest) the social status or prestige of 24 occupations. To facilitate date analysis, the ratings of twelve occupations (secretary, child care worker, registered nurse, receptionist, preschool teacher, kindergarten teacher, telephone

operator, bank teller, elementary school teacher, librarian, nursing aide, social and recreation worker) were combined to create the female occupation variable score. The same procedure was used for the remaining twelve occupations (real estate agent, computer specialist, physician, farmer, engineer, lawyer, police officer, dentist, carpenter, truck drive, automobile mechanic, rancher) to create the male occupations variable score.

The result of the analysis of variance for female occupations score by group (older worker versus young worker) revealed a significant effect for group, $F(1,126) = 3.64$, $p<.05$. The result of the post hoc test (Kirk, 1982) suggested that older child care workers' ratings ($M = 33.923$) of female jobs differed significantly from those of younger child care workers ($M = 38.063$). Younger workers assigned higher status to female occupations than did older workers.

On male occupations, ratings the results of the analysis of variance for male occupational score by group (older worker versus young worker) indicated a highly significant effect for group, $F(1,136) = 47.73$, $p<.0001$. This result suggests little agreement between older and younger child care workers on ratings of jobs men typically perform in this society. The results of the post hoc test reveal that highest ratings for male occupations were given by older child care workers ($M = 47.172$); lowest ratings were given by younger child care workers ($M = 34.450$).

Perceived Support Systems

Feelings of occupational worth involves child care workers' perceptions of job value. Additionally, it consists of what Sullivan (1953) long ago identified as the reflected appraisal of others. This collective reflected appraisal is thought to represent an occupational support system for child care workers.

To determine child care workers' perception of others' feelings about the value of child care work, respondents used a five point scale (1 = unimportant to 5 = very important) to rate the following seven questions "How important does your spouse/significant other, child/children, mother, father, child client, parent client, society feel your job is?" Results of separate analyses of variance for each of these questions indicate only the variables child view, $F\ (1,86) = 3.64$, $p<.05$, .05) and societal view, $F\ (1,86) = 4.27$, $p<.04$, produced significant differences. Older caregivers ($M = 4.800$) perceived that their own children valued the child care work they do more highly than did younger child care workers ($M = 3.8904$). Older caregivers ($M = 3.1026$) reported feeling that society viewed child care work as less important than younger caregivers ($M = 3.5918$).

Indices of Professionalism

To measure indications of professionalism, respondents were asked "Do you consider yourself professionally employed?" and "Do you consider yourself a business person?" In response to these yes/no forced choice items, eight percent (N = 3) of the older caregivers reported being a business person and 23% (N = 9) reported being professionally employed. Forty-one percent (N = 39) of the younger caregivers reported being a business person and 70% (N = 67) reported being professionally employed. Two older caregivers (5%) and 19 younger caregivers (20%) reported membership in a professional organization.

When asked to rate on a five point scale (1 = not at all fairly paid to 5 = very fairly paid), 73% (N = 29) of the older child care workers and 48% (N = 46) of the younger caregivers reported being fairly or very fairly paid. When asked to rate their success in caregiving on a five point scale (1 = not at all successful to 5 = very successful) 88% (N = 35) of the older caregivers and 71% (N = 68) of the younger child care workers reported feeling successful or very successful in their child care job.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The pattern of findings yields an interesting profile of the differences between older and younger child care workers' perceptions of their job value, their support systems, and their roles as professionals. The results of the data are supportive of four major conclusions. First, older and younger child care workers do not differ overall in the way they perceive their job importance or their success as child care workers. Second, while all respondents agree their job is important, they do not concur that traditional male and female occupations are equally prestigious. Third, older and younger child care workers perceive differential support from their own children and from society at large. Finally, older and younger child care workers differ in the way they identify themselves as professional, business people, and teachers or caregivers.

Job Value

The results of the study reveal no significant differences in the way older and younger child care workers view their job importance, job success, and perceived support from spouses or child and parent clients. Older and younger caregivers did however, rate the prestige of traditional male and female jobs in significantly different ways. The older child care workers' higher ratings of traditional male jobs and lower ratings of traditional female jobs may be reflective of the cohort in which they were born. Older women as a group may not have perceived the caring for children as a "real job" because historically it has not been treated as such. Older workers may not feel they

have received any job status for the duties they performed within their roles as mother, wife, or caregiver. Thus, their ratings are reflective of traditional societal values in which caring for young children is not highly rewarded. The unanswered question of this study is "Do these differences translate into how care is provided?" It is not known if older caregivers provide differential opportunities for young children than do their younger peers.

Perceived Support Systems

Work is directly related not only to how people identify themselves, but also how they are identified by others. Older caregivers reported feeling significantly more support from their own children for their child care work than did younger respondents. The children of older workers not only have been recipients of their mother's care, but they may also be parents themselves. The experience of either providing care for their own children or using child care provided by others, may enable children of older child care workers to support their parents in their choice of a child care job.

Yet older caregivers reported feeling significantly less societal support for their child care work than did younger workers. As a group the older respondents did not receive many monetary rewards or much occupational status for caring of children in their role as mother. It is possible that they did not expect this to change when they cared for the children of others.

Indices of Professionalism

The concept of professionalism is manifested differently for older and younger child care workers. Most respondents indicate feeling successful in their job, but very few older workers identify themselves as business people or professionals. This suggests that older workers might feel good about a job they have been doing for a longer time - child care. Yet they may be unable to see the child care work they perform for others as a business or professional venture. This is further substantiated by the finding that despite very low wages, nearly three-fourths of the older respondents indicated they were fairly paid, as compared to only half of the younger workers.

In addition to these indices of professionalism, the overwhelming majority of older workers identify themselves as teachers. This may seem curious when compared to the low percentage who considered themselves professionals. Yet the title caregiver is relatively new. The older worker may not yet feel comfortable with it.

The findings in this study indicate there are differences between younger and older child care workers. Older workers in this study did bring a unique profile to their child care responsibilities. They were satisfied with their pay, felt successful with their own job performance, valued their job highly, and felt supported by their own children in their occupational choice.

Traditional preparation and on-going professional development of child care workers has focused primarily on

providing knowledge and developing skills to deliver quality child care. The results of this study suggest that traditional training should go beyond this focus by including content that deals with the unique characteristics of older child care workers and supports their contributions.

In addition to basic child care and child development, older child care workers might benefit from opportunities for professional development. They could be encouraged to apply their knowledge and experience to a professionally oriented framework to help them view themselves as professionals. To facilitate the sense of community with all child care workers, training could be used to provide a mechanism by which all child care workers learn what they have in common and to view their differences as potential resources. This focus on professionalism can be used by professional organizations for the development of policies and advocacy strategies that diminish destructive stereotypes about child care workers in general, and older child care workers in particular.

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